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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of ethnicity, gender, and social class on young children and discusses the ways in which children can be educated to appreciate and value diversity. It also summarizes the ideas of E. King's "Educating Young Children in a Diverse Society" (1994), highlighting the strategies advocated in the book that encourage teachers and educators to implement diversity into programs for young children. The paper notes that early childhood educators need to focus on content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equitable pedagogy, and empowerment when considering curriculum development and program practices. Educators also need to address their own cultural, gender, and class attitudes, as well as the attitudes of their students, when formulating curriculum content and teaching methods. The paper concludes by noting that using information about culture and learning in sensitive and positive ways will help educators value and promote diversity in all aspects of education. (MDM)

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EDUCATING YOUNG CHILDREN IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

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The world we live in is now and always has been an environment of physical and social diversity. Even where homogeneity appears on the surface, diversity is the norm in human society. In the education setting, pedagogical problems are created when the attitude of the educator does not notice diversity or when a negative view is given of the natural diversity that is always there. This has created a false reality for teaching and learning.

An awareness of diversity within our human society is a necessity for anyone interested in the knowlege base of early childhood education. A respect for different forms of diversity and an appropriate response to diversity can enhance education for all. This paper emphasizes how politicizing diversity can contribute to practices of inequality in early childhood education especially in its processes and content. It tries to present information, teaching strategies and incentives needed to generate an awareness of cultural diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender and social class in very young children. Early childhood education has experienced dramatic changes in recent years and as educators, there is an urgent necessity to infuse the diversity perspective into the teaching of all young children.

Keywords:

Diversity
Multicultural Education
Early Childhood Education.

EDUCATING YOUNG CHILDREN IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

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As we approach the twenty-first century the increasing recognition of diversity within our modern day society poses a significant challenge. How do we create a cohesive and just society while at the same time allowing citizens to maintain their ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic identities. In the past two decades, multicultural education has emerged as a means for including diverse groups and changing the school curriculum to create equal opportunities for all students. The total school environment reflects the diversity of groups in classrooms, schools and the society as a whole.

Multicultural Education and the Challenge of Diversity

There has been a proliferation of textbooks on multicultural education which has become the umbrella term for dealing with many types of differences in our society and in a global context as well. These attributes include differences based on ethnicity or race, social class, religion, gender, age, disabling conditions, and intellectual abilities. The definition of multicultural education has been broadened to include teaching "special" children - the physically disabled, the mentally retarded, the emotionally disturbed, and the gifted and talented. Many people think of multicultural education in terms of curriculum content but according to James Bank, a respected authority on multicultural education, it also includes such things as teaching for equity and working to reduce prejudice.

All of us know too well how discomforting it can be to feel very different from those around us in terms of strong beliefs or practices. In negative situations this can lead to distrust, hostility and even hatred. These feelings if made worse by perceived unfairness can explode into physical violence, as they have been periodically in the United States. One way to reduce the problem is through a change in educational practices and attitudes. Schools should take steps to reflect the diversity of modern society and while they cannot reform society single-handedly , they can and must play a key role.

Just as the field of multicultural education has been redefined and reorganized continually in the light of tremendous changes in society in recent years, early childhood education has also experienced dramatic changes. In 1987, Patricia Ramsey wrote in her important and forward-looking book (Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World: Multicultural Education for Young Children) that the majority of early childhood programs were racially,

culturally and socioeconomically homogenous.It is questionable how multicultural education can be appropriately given in such a setting. For children who grow up without any opportunity to interact with people different from themselves, their classroom experiences have to compensate for this lack. Teachers are perplexed about how to make the diversity of our society and the world seem real to their children.

In this paper it is emphasised that what we need now for educating all children, especially our very young, is a diversity perspective . As a concept, it is defined as one that, in early childhood education, we must infuse a positive awareness and inclusion of differences in the education of all young children. A diversity perspective calls for the application of knowledge about ethnicity, social class, and gender to issues, problems, viewpoints, theories and programs surrounding young children.The impact of young children with disabilities and their needs must also be considered . These concerns are addressed very appropriately in the text by King (1994). This paper highlights from the book the strategies, innovative ideas and encouragement for teachers and educators in meeting and implementing the challenge of diversity into programs for young children.

Impact of Ethnicity, Gender and Social Class agents on Young Children

Ethnicity, gender and social class are central elements of the diversity perspective in the lives of young children as they enter the school setting. These children are socialised at very early ages into the "ways of their society," the values, attitudes, roles and statuses of the adults that surround them.

Most adults, however in our society have very selective recollections of experiences during their early childhood years.When asked to recall memorable events they may focus on occasions with a grandparent, a kindergarten school teacher or a specific aunt or uncle. Adults tend to idealize these recollected situations and they forget to recognise the importance of their socialisation process in the early childhood years.They have limited appreciation for the extent of very young children's perceptions about social situations, interpersonal relations and the turmoil, tensions and troubles that surround human beings from time to time.

Young children, on the other hand, have less ability to communicate their feelings and impressions verbally and when adults do not realize the extent of their understandings of the social scenarios unfolding around these children , the consequences can be upsetting. Sociologists and anthropologists list the sources or agencies of socialization as the family, the school, the peer group and, of course, the contemporary network of the mass media. Socialization occurs in many settings and in interactions with many people organised into groupings of various kinds. These groups exert pressures on children and thereby impact on their preparation for life in the society.

One of the factors that affect children early in their lives is race and ethnic awareness.Each day, young children leave their homes, where they are immersed in the specific ethnic enclave of their family, to go to school. These first school experiences are most often patterned after the majority society. When they return home they resume family life in the ethnic group with its own cultural patterns and traditions, and perhaps even to a different language or dialect for the rest of the day and night. Early in life many youngsters learn that reality is being a marginal person living with two everyday realities, one at school and one at home.Teachers of young children need to recognize that people often occupy several areas of cultural meaning.

Research has shown that young children, as early as three years of age, are aware of ethnic differences. They can identify skin color; hair texture; shape of eyes, noses, and mouths; and general physical differences. Our Singapore society has been more culturally sensitive and young children can recognize and discuss ethnic and racial differences. It is all around them - on the television, in their schools, on the buses, often in their family and neighbourhood settings. According to King (1990) ethnicity is defined as a sense of peoplehood and commonality derived from kinship patterns, a shared historical past, common experiences, religious affiliations, language or linguistic commonalities, shared values attitudes, perceptions, modes of expression, and identity. Young children are already forming their ethnic affiliations and ethnic identities as they are being socialized in the home, in the neighbourhood, and in those first weeks at school.

Every person has an ethnic identity, a heritage that shapes his or her attitudes, values, tastes, habits, language or dialect and choices in everyday life. Everyone has also a gender identity. People differ in the degree to which they recognise their own ethnic identity and in their awareness of how their ethnicity and gender affects their day-to-day lives. Many do not realise that their ethnic identification can change with the passage of time,with geographic location, with upward or downward social mobility, from the impact of international events, and with their professional and social contacts. Social constructions are so taken for granted and unexamined that people do not realize that gender identification and social class affiliation subtly affect how they view themselves. (King 1994)

According to King, in recent years much more attention has been focused on intergroup relations and prejudice reduction. We know that ethnic group affiliation and gender identity are decisively influenced by what happens in the schools and in the home. Yet, by the time a child comes to school, he or she has already been socialized into a set of language patterns, values, attitudes, habits and customs that are determined by ethnicity and gender. If the school, however subtly, devalues these characteristics, the child will inevitably have less self- esteem and pride. Since there is a direct relationship between a child's self-esteem (or lack of it) and the ability to learn, children who have been made to feel inferior because of their ethnicity or gender find the

learning process more difficult. Teachers can call on the concepts of the social construction of ethnic and gender identity and primary and secondary socialization to bring a new awareness to their classrooms and to revitalize their teaching.

Very young children adopt and re-enact the roles and expectations of their immediate surroundings, the home and the neighbourhood. The forces of socialization present in their home environments carry impressionable messages for them. From observations, one can see how the differences in the way mothers dress their toddlers indicate that , in her thinking, boys are often allowed to be untidy and do not need to be concerned with their physical appearance, but girls must be neat and carefully groomed at all times. Females in our culture are often judged by their physical appearance than are males, and therefore little girls learn at an early age to link their self-worth to their looks. Girls learn to be careful, neat, dainty and meticulous; whereas boys are encouraged to be risk takers even if they make a mess.

Research has also shown that teachers in school reward girls for their neatness, patience and helping "nature", whereas boys are encouraged to be independent thinkers. Boys still receive the majority of teachers' or other adults' time and attention. (Sadker and Sadker, 1986; Grayson and Miller, 1990). Within the same classroom,boys and girls do not receive the same quantity and quality of educational experiences because of unconscious biases, differing expectations, and hence unequal interactions from adults.

King (1994) noted several forms of bias in the early childhood classroom and how very young children, early in their lives, internalise these biases and stereotypes.She listed the following types - (1) exclusion/tokenism,(2) biased language,(3) imbalance/inequality,(4) unreality/ethnocentrism and (5) isolation/segregation. The following examples are quoted:

-referring to people of Asian descent as "orientals" hearkens back to the days of British colonization.

-the generic use of "he" to represent both males and females tends to exclude the existence and contributions of women. Such words as forefathers, spokesman, chairman, and policeman can be construed as setting occupational parameters that predlude the participation of women..

-the use of the word "handicapped" has its roots in the days when disabled beggars sat on street corners with "cap in hand" asking for alms. The use of terms such as "lunatic" or"deformed" is demeaning and inappropriate when identifying children who are exceptional.

-persons with disabilities are portrayed as helpless and rarely in situations of leadership or where they demoinstrate strength and self-reliance. They are also rarely portrayed in curricular materials for young children.

-children are seldom taught about how women helped in times of war or about women's concerns and rights.

Incorporating Diversity into Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Early Childhood Classrooms

Leading American child psychologists such as David Elkind, David Weikart and Benjamin Bloom have emphasized that curricula for young children are best designed from a clearly developmentally perspective. They have pointed out what experienced teachers of young children know: that growth and development involve a mix of the cognitive, social, physical and emotional aspects . Therefore, in planning the early childhood curriculum, the basic developmental needs of youngsters must be kept well in focus.

According to King (1994) there are two levels of developmental appropriateness for us to keep in mind. The first is based on age. As a child grows, specific physical, linguistic, emotional, social and cognitive changes take place. Research in child growth and development over decades has documented these assertions. Within the range of normal development, these age-related changes are predictable. Therefore, activities and lessons can be planned based on verifiable knowledge of age-related occurences.

The second level is based on individual differences. Within the predictable normal range of development based on age, individual differences occur among human beings. These are due both to "nature", or inherited chracteristics, and to "nurture", the environmental influences that impinge on the individual. A child's reactions to past experiences as well as to new ones are reflective of differences in personality. The rate at which a child develops physically, linguistically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally may vary. Activities for the classrooms of young children should be planned with individual variations in mind.

The physical, linguistic, cognitive, emotional and social growth of the child should be addressed through careful planning. Four major aspects of the young child's curriculum to be considered are the following: (1) emergent literacy and the language arts; (2) motor skills; (3) socialization among peers and with adults; and (4) the broadening of cognitive and perceptual knowledge.

Prominent early childhood educators have known about and utilized developmentally appropriate practices for a very long time. What is different at the close of the twentieth century, what is striking, innovative, and essential is the recognition and incorporation of ethnic, gender and social class diversity into developmentally appropriate practice in the early childhood curriculum.

During the latter part of this century, educators have learned that an effective multicultural curriculum is achieved when teachers at all grade levels change the basic assumptions of the curriculum and their frames of reference. History, cultures and perspectives of many groups are taught. This infusion should

begin in early childhood, long before students reach the secondary school level.

Not all curriculum decisions are made by curriculum planners or curriculum specialists. When the teacher actually leaves the classroom, frequently it is intent rather than content that truly impacts the curriculum. Therefore it should be the intention of every early childhood teacher to infuse the classroon with an appreciation of diversity and a recognition of the multicultural nature of our society. Today, pluralism is a fact of living in a modern world.

James Banks(1994) identified five dimensions whereby early childhood teachers can help implement and assess programs that respond to student diversity :

1. Content integration - deals with the extent to which teachers illuminate key points of instruction with content reflecting diversity. One common approach is the recognition of contributions ie teachers work into the curriculum various isolated facts about heroes from diverse groups.

2. Knowledge construction - or the extent to which teachers help students understand how perspectives of people within a discipline influence the conclusions reached within that discipline. This dimension is also concerned with whether students learn to form knowledge for themselves.

3. Prejudice reduction - has to do with efforts to help students to develop positive attitudes about different groups. Research has revealed a need for this kind of education and the efficacy of it. Children enter school with many negative attitudes and misconceptions about different racial and ethnic groups.

4. Equitable pedagogy - concerns ways to modify teaching so as to facilitate academic achievement among students from diverse groups.

5. Empowering school culture - concerns the extent to which a school's culture and organisation ensure educational equality and cultural empowerment for students from diverse groups. Some of the variables considered are grouping practices, social climate, assessment practices, participation in extra curricular activities and staff expectations and responses to diversity.

Cultural Diversity and Learning: What Research Says

According to Pat Guild (1994) cultures do have distinctive learning style patterns, but the great variation among individuals within groups means that educators must use diverse teaching strategies with all students. Every child in school must be given a chance to succeed and to be able to do that teachers need to fully understand the ways individuals learn. Knowing each

student, especially his or her culture, is essential preparation for facilitating, structuring and validating successful learning for all.

This leads to three critical questions. Do students of the same culture have common learning style patterns and characteristics? If they do, how would we know it? And most important , what are the implications for educators? Guild stresses that success for the diverse populations that schools serve, calls for a continual reexamination of educators' assumptions, expectations and biases.

These questions are controversial but important as we need to know how the individual child learns in order to help us decide what to do for him or her. However, generalizations about a group of people have often led to naive inferences about individuals within that group. This is a serious error since people connected by culture may exhibit a characteristic pattern of style but they need not have the same style traits as the group taken as a whole.

Attempts to explain persistent achievement differences between minority and nonminority groups students have been prone to much sensitivity and controversy. This has been so because according to Pat Guild, it is all too easy to confuse descriptions of differences with explanations for deficits and in the dispute. It brings us face to face with philosophical issues that involve deeply held beliefs. Debaters differ over whether instructional equality is synonymous with educational equity. Many surveys have discussed the interdynamics of different cultures and ways of learning but each study comes from a very distinctive approach, focusing either on a specific learning style or a particular cultural group. No work seems to be comprehensive on the area of culture and learning styles.

Generally researchers have described three sources of information with regards to culture and learning styles.(Guild, 1994)

1. The first is the set of observation-based descriptions of cultural groups of learners. Researchers who are familiar with each group have written these descriptions to sensitize people outside the culture to the experiences of children inside the culture.

2. A second way that we know about the links between culture and learning styles is data-based descriptions of specific groups. Here researchers administer learning/cognitive style instruments to produce a profile of a cultural group, compare this group with another previously studied one, or validate a particular instrument for cross-cultural use.

3. The third way is through direct discussion. Honest and perceptive information shared between researchers have clarified much of the haziness surrounding the controversy between culture and learning styles.

Five areas of consensus have developed in the research on culture and learning styles. Generally researchers agree that students of any particular age will differ in their ways of learning. They believe that learning styles are a function of both nature and nurture. Most researchers concur that learning styles are neutral. Every learning style approach can be used successfully, but can also become a stumbling block if applied inappropriately or overused.

In both observational and data-based research on cultures, one consistent finding is that, within a group, the variations among individuals are as great as their commonalities. No one should attribute a particular style to all individuals within a group. Many researchers also acknowledge the cultural conflict between some students and the typical learning experiences in schools. According to Pat Guild(1994) when a child is socialized in ways that are inconsistent with school expectations and patterns, the child needs to make a difficult daily adjustment to the culture of the school and his or her teachers.

Research has indicated that educators will be more successful if they understand five variables that matter a great deal in working with a diverse student population: teachers' beliefs about students, curriculum content and materials, instructional approaches, educational settings and teacher education. How teachers think about education and students makes a pronounced difference in student performance and achievement. For some teachers, providing more equitable pedagogy may be as simple as using more cooperative learning strategies. One other area- whether the race and ethnicity of teachers affects student learning- remains unclear. Recent review of the literature on African-American teachers finds no connection between teacher race/ethnicity and student achievement. It means that all teachers are accountable for teaching all students.

Educating for a Diverse Society: Some Issues.

There has much agreement in recent years among many educators of the importance in improving educational practices to meet the challenge of diversity in the classrooms and schools. One disconcerting issue is that the educators have yet to agree what this diversity is. Two different perspectives are predominant.

According to Ron Janzen (1994), one view of diversity is to emphasize the assimilation of multiple cultures into a common curriculum. Educators with this view believe that studying other cultures is worthwhile in that it leads to better relationships among ethnic groups and enables the dominant culture to select and adopt significant cultural accomplishments. Assimiliationism accepts the importance of understanding multiple beliefs, but has as its primary goal the amalgamation of all groups into a common mainstream.

On the other hand, the goal of cultural pluralism is that ethnic groups will remain intact and that their idiosyncratic ways of

knowing and acting will be respected and continued. To cultural pluralists, having one set of cultural principles amounts to imperialism towards minority groups. Diversity , this group believes , should not only develop appreciation for the perspectives of others, but should sustain a value-tolerant acceptance of diverse cultural understandings, belief systems, customs and sociopolitical traditions. Teachers and students try to construct meaning together and thereby create an empowering environment.

Many educators fear that cultural pluralism's acceptance of many religious, social and political perspectives will lead to a fragmented society. Confusion has arisen when teachers are asked to "infuse pluralist multiculturalism" into their courses and at the same time told to produce students who are culturally literate in the traditional sense. As a result teachers must make choices among many topics and curriculum materials, which take either assimilistic or pluralistic perspectives.

According to James Banks the two perspectives exist but they are not so diametrically opposed. The goal is to help students function in their home, school and society. To achieve this, one way is simple awareness. Teachers, educators,parents and students need to enter into continued dialogue about the assumptions and interpretations that underlie diversity. Even if they do not reach general consensus about which path or educational practice to take, educators must understand that different paths and practices exist and that different classroom activities may fall on one or the other pathway. As they engage in such discussions and analyses, they may ultimately come to a clearer understanding of what diversity means for the curriculum in schools.

One other issue is how teachers working from their own cultures and teaching styles can successfully reach diverse populations. This has been well discussed among concerned researchers. Guild noted it as a persistent point in applying knowledge about culture and learning styles to the classroom. Bennett (1986) sums up the problem this way : "to the extent that teachers teach as they have been taught to learn, and to the extent that culture shapes learning styles, students who share a teacher's ethnic background will be favored in class."

Some argue though, that we have all learned successfully from teachers who were neither like us in learning style or in culture. Often these were according to Guild (1994) masterful, caring teachers and our own motivation sometimes helped us learn in spite of a teacher. It is clear though, that teachers of all cultures and styles will have to work hard to provide equitable opportunities for all students.

Perhaps the most weighty of the application issues has to do with the ways many teachers have tried all sorts of instructional practices to seek the one right way to teach. When there is evidence that a strategy is effective with some students, most teachers would try to apply it to every student in every school. Guild continues to emphasise that if instructional decisions were

based on an understanding of each individual's culture and ways of learning, we would never assume that uniform practices would be effective for all. We would recognize that the only way to meet diverse learning needs would be to intentionally apply diverse strategies.

As Bennett (1986) says, equitable opportunities for success demand "unequal teaching methods that respond to relevant differences among students." As we try to accomodate to student differences, it is most important to deeply value each person's individuality. Using information about culture and learning in sensitive and positive ways will help educators value and promote diversity in all aspects of the school.

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